

CLINICAL ETHICS

Attitudes of Finnish doctors towards euthanasia in 1993 and 2003

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Questionnaire studies on the attitudes of Finnish doctors towards euthanasia were conducted in 1993 and 2003, and the results show that they have not become more positive.

The attitudes of doctors towards active euthanasia are, in general, more negative than the attitudes of the general public. The interpretations of surveys are, however, highly dependent on the formulation of the questions and, although the questions posed to these groups are similar, it is probable that the interpretations of doctors differ from those of the general public.

According to most studies, most doctors, except those from The Netherlands, are against legalisation on active euthanasia. Considerable variation exists in the percentage of doctors opposing the practice. The variation is, of course, partly because of the variation in opinion, but several methodological issues also explain it. Some studies have asked direct questions about the legalisation of euthanasia—for example, in others, the questions have been about the ethical acceptance of the practice. Some studies have used case vignettes, whereas others have used general questionnaires. The knowledge and availability of palliative care may also affect the answers.¹

The definition of euthanasia is of particular importance in the studies. The distinction between passive euthanasia (ie, withholding or withdrawing life-saving treatment) and active euthanasia (ie, deliberately terminating the life of the patient with a lethal drug, for example,) has not always been clear.

Although numerous studies with different methods have focused on the attitudes of doctors towards euthanasia and other practices at the end of life, we lack knowledge on possible changes in these attitudes. Legal changes in The

Netherlands and Belgium, and open public discussion on these issues, most recently in the Council of Europe (<http://assembly.coe.int/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc03/EDOC9898.htm>), may lead us to think that the attitudes of doctors have also become more positive. This study determined whether such a change had taken place in Finland.

PARTICIPANTS, METHODS AND RESULTS

A questionnaire study on the attitudes of Finnish doctors towards euthanasia was conducted in 1993 and published in Finnish.² We repeated the study on a random sample of 840 Finnish doctors of working age.³ Most of the questionnaire consisted of statements about euthanasia, for which the doctors were asked to express their agreement or disagreement on a 5-point Likert scale. The two questionnaires were almost identical; only one question, referring to practice in The Netherlands, was modified slightly, owing to the changes in legislation that had taken place after 1993.

The Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Public Health at the University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland, approved the study. The Finnish Medical Association participated by providing addresses and handling the mailing and data processing.

Table 1 presents the main results, which show that there were no major changes in the attitudes during the decade 1993–2003. In some respects, however, the attitudes were more negative in 2003 and the difference was significant. Because of the changes in legislation in the late 1990s, the question referring to practice in The Netherlands had to be modified slightly, and therefore the figures cannot be compared directly.

COMMENT

The attitudes of Finnish doctors towards active euthanasia did not become more positive between 1993 and 2003. The

Table 1 Agreement with statements about active euthanasia in 1993 and 2003

Statement	Fully or partly agree (%)		Fully or partly disagree (%)		p Value
	1993	2003	1993	2003	
Active euthanasia should be legalised in Finland	30.2	29.5	50.7	60.7	0.035
A practice similar to that in The Netherlands should be adopted	48.7	36.7	37.2	53.0	<0.001
A doctor should be punished for assisting in a suicide	34.7	31.3	44.8	49.3	NS
Passive euthanasia (eg, withdrawing ventilator support) and active euthanasia are different issues in principle	83.7	81.0	13.5	13.8	NS
If active euthanasia is legalised in Finland, I may sometimes practise it	24.3	20.9	50.1	60.4	0.007
I would report a colleague to the authorities if I heard of him or her practising active euthanasia	8.1	13.4	64.1	50.5	<0.001
With adequate terminal care and pain control, active euthanasia is not needed	57.4	62.2	33.1	31.3	NS
Accepting active euthanasia would harm the doctor–patient relationship in general	47.0	43.7	38.6	39.8	NS

NS, non-significant.

legal changes in Europe have been widely reported in Finland, but they have not changed the views of doctors. On the contrary, their views may have become more negative in some respects.

In general, the views of the public are far more positive than those of doctors. We do not know, however, whether the views of the public have changed or whether only the openness and magnitude of the discussion has increased.

It is understandable that the views of doctors differ considerably from those of the general public. When asked about euthanasia, doctors consider themselves to be causally active agents engaged in the practice, whereas lay people probably see themselves as potential sufferers at the end of their life. As doctors are, in fact, expected to participate actively in euthanasia, if it is to be legalised, it is important that their views be taken into consideration before any change in legislation is made.

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